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The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space in Multimedia Chat Communities

or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Palace Props

To be published in: Michael Beißwenger (ed.): *Chat-Kommunikation. Sprache, Interaktion, Sozialität & Identität in synchroner computervermittelter Kommunikation. Perspektiven auf ein interdisziplinäres Forschungsfeld.* Stuttgart 2001.

Visual chat is a simple way to describe them, although they have gone by a variety of other names, such as multimedia chat, GMUKS (graphical multi-user konversations), and „habitats", a term coined by Randy Farmer, the first to invent them. They are something of a cross between a MOO and a traditional chat room. As social environments, they are unique in that they are graphical. Rather than limiting users to text-only communications, as in most chat rooms, multimedia programs add a visual dimension that creates the illusion of movement, space, and physicality. It allows people to express their identity v*isually*, rather than just through written words. The result is a whole new realm for self-expression and social interaction with subtleties and complexities not seen in text-only chat rooms.

One excellent example of a multimedia environment is the client/server program called the „Palace". There are basically two visual components to this environment. The first is the backdrop or „room" in which people interact with each other. There are hundreds of Palace sites located across the internet, many with their own unique graphical themes for the collection of rooms that make up the site (e.g., a bowling alley, a futuristic Cybertown, a haunted house, etc.). The oldest and one of the most populated sites is the „Main Mansion" (or simply „Main") which has consisted of approximately 30 rooms, including a bar, a game room, bedrooms, a study, a beach, a moor, and several surrealistic scenes, such as the orbit of an alien planet and an underground cave that looks like Hades. Users can move freely within and between the rooms. Like characters in comic strips, you communicate with others via typed text that appears in balloons that pop out from your head or body.

Head? Body? This is the second visual feature of Palace: „avatars" or „props". Although these words often are used interchangeably, there is a slight distinction in the minds' of some users. Avatars refer to pictures, drawings, or icons that users choose to represent themselves. Props are objects that users may add to their avatars (say, a hat or cigar) or place into the Palace room or give to another person (say, a glass of beer or a bouquet of flowers). In this article, I will use the terms interchangeably.

Inspired by Scott McCloud's concept of „masking" in comics, Jim Bumgard-

ner, the creator of Palace, believed that avatars enable people to maintain partial anonymity – which allows them to loosen up a bit. It's like going to a masquerade party. Seated behind their masks, people feel more free to say and do what they please. No doubt, the avatar-driven lifestyle at the Palace sets up a self-selection process that determines which users decide to stay, and in some cases almost *live* there. People who love graphics – and especially those who love costumes and masks – often make Palace their home away from home.

This anonymity is very different than that found in text-only chat environments, where only the name you have chosen publicizes your online identity. At the Palace, you also have a costume. Wearing a costume at a real-life party does indeed filter out many of the physical features of your identity. You are somewhat „anonymous". But the costume also symbolically highlights aspects of who you are. It amplifies one of your interests, some facet of your personality or lifestyle, or something you wish for. As we will see, the same is true of avatars in a multimedia community.

In this chapter, I will focus mostly on avatars at the Main Mansion Palace site which is maintained by Electric Communities („EC"), the company that now owns and develops the Palace software. However, much of this discussion applies to avatars at many other sites and to multimedia chat communities in general.

Types of Avatars

„Avs", as Palace members affectionately call them, fall into two overall categories. The first are the standard set of „smileys" that come with the Palace program. Inspired by ASCII smileys, these faces are available to all users. They come in a set that displays basic human emotions and behavioral signals – happy, sad, angry, winking, sleeping/bored, blushing, head-nodding, head-shaking. The user also can change the color of the face or add to it one or more props, such as hats, wigs, scarfs, devil horns, a halo, a glass of beer, a bicycle, etc. Because the faces and props can be mixed and matched, users have at their disposal an almost infinite array of combinations to express themselves. Want to drink a beer and smile? Do it! Want to poke at someone who irritates you. Put on that frown and pitchfork!

Fig. 1: The Standard Palace Smileys and Props.
The various colors, facial expressions, and accessories for the standard smiley avatars give users a wide range to express themselves. Yet most members prefer to create their own custom avatars. The smileys are associated with newbies because these unregistered users do not have the ability to create custom avatars.

As such, the standard set of avs are designed very cleverly and offer a wide range of behavioral and emotional expression. Because you quickly can shift among a variety of facial gestures to convey your emotional state, one member, Heyoka, told me these smileys are her avatars of choice. She is the exception rather than the rule. Most longstanding members of Palace rarely use them. In fact, some of them *hate* the smileys. „They're dorky", one member told me, „I wouldn't be caught dead wearing those tennis balls".

On one level, his perception is inaccurate because the standard smileys and props are quite clever and artistic. On another level, though, he quite accurately touches on a pervasive attitude among many Palace members. The standard avs are associated with newbies, whom some consider a lower class in the Palace population. They are fresh arrivals who do not understand the Palace culture and have not yet established their identity and status in it. In the early days of Palace, new users who had not registered their software (i.e., paid for it) were restricted to using only the standard avs and props. They did not have the power create their *own* customized avatars, which is tantamount to establishing your own unique identity among a horde of avatars. Even for users who have that power, failing to create and display your own personal avs is taken as a sign that you don't know how to. The bottom line: to wear a standard smiley is to look like a newbie.

This leads to the second major category of avatars – those created by the members themselves. This is the key to what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Palace. Visually, you can be anything you want. Only your graphics skills and imagination limit you. Early in the development of Pal-

ace, Bumgardner noticed that people highly preferred the custom faces over the more anonymous smileys. In cyberspace, most people don't want to be totally anonymous. But they *do* like control over how their identity is expressed.... They like it a lot. Hang out at the Palace for any length of time and a seemingly endless parade of avs of all shapes, colors, and styles pass before your eyes. Visit the Palace everyday, and within a few weeks your prop file (where the client program automatically stores any new image it encounters) can blossom to 10, 20, 30 megs (fortunately, there is an option to purge this file).

What kinds of avatars do members create for themselves? Some are pictures or icons borrowed from internet archives, scanned from hardcopy, or taken from other digital sources. Users might edit or combine these pictures according to their particular tastes. Some artistic members create props from scratch, although this is a fairly rare – and envious – skill. The technical and artistic ability one demonstrates through personal avs is an important source of self-esteem and social status.

We social scientists love to categorize the phenomena we study. So allow me to indulge my professional inclinations. One way to categorize avs would be to use well-known personality types as a guideline – for example, McWilliams (1994) system for psychoanalytic diagnosis. Although these types described by McWilliams are for clinical diagnosis, when translated to a non-pathological dimension, they also are very useful in categorizing „normal" personalities. The theme, characteristics, or interpersonal impact of an avatar may be closely associated with one of these specific types.

- *narcissistic* – themes of power, status, perfection, grandiosity; draws for admiration and praise; feelings of being „special" and „privileged"
- *schizoid* – themes of interpersonal detachment and indifference, perhaps combined with evidence of abstract or intellectual thinking; little evidence of warmth and tenderness; the „loner" themes
- *paranoid* – distrust, isolation, hypervigilance, blaming or finding fault with others; cold, humorless, argumentative characteristics
- *depressive* – gloom, darkness, loss, low self-esteeem
- *manic* – energtic, grandiose, impulsive
- *masochistic* – self-destructive, themes revolving around the „bad self" or „woe is me"
- *obsessive/compulsive* – seriouis, formal; themes of control and perfection; shows evidence of a concern about details and rules
- *psychopathic* – antisocial, violates rules; little evidence of shame or guilt; takes advantage of others; possible superficial friendliness or charm
- *histrionic* – attention-seeking and seductive in flavor, dramatic, emotional, vain; themes involving dependency
- *schizotypal* – themes of being aloof, indifferent; evidence of magical thinking or superstitious beliefs; peculiar characteristics

Another simpler approach to categorizing avatars would be to group them

according to more general visual types. Here I'll outline several different categories of custom avatars. By no means is this list definitive or exhaustive. There are many ways to slice a pie. I've chosen these categories partly because some of them are fairly obvious, and partly because each one conveys interesting psychological and social themes – themes that, in some cases, overlap with the personality types described above.

Animal Avatars

Fig. 2: Animal Avatars

Animal avatars are some of the most popular at the Palace. Some people come as their pets. Because animals symbolize certain traits or attributes in myth as well as popular culture (e.g., strength, loyalty, grace, independence, cunning, transcendence), the animal chosen for an avatar probably bears psychological significance to the person – perhaps representing some real aspect of his or her identity, or some characteristic admired by the person. Thinking in the tradition of the Native American, we might even regard an animal avatar as being an individuals „totem" – i.e., a symbol of one's essential nature or potential.

Cartoon Avatars

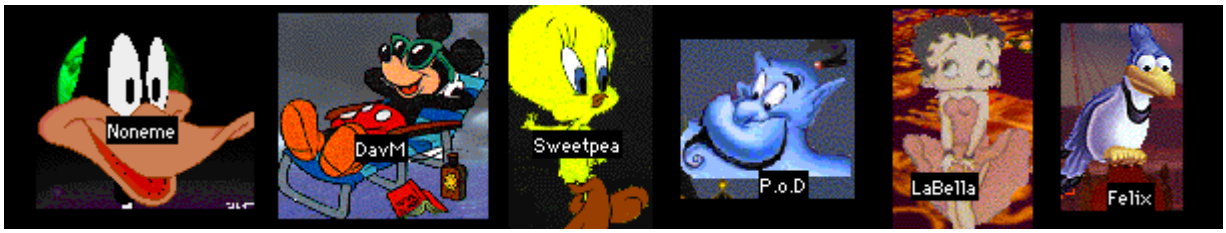


Fig. 3: Cartoon Avatars I

When Bumgardner designed the Palace, he specifically choose a „cartoony" atmosphere. For example, the balloons that pop out from one's head when speaking is a carry over from the world of comic strips. Bumgardner felt that people would readily identify with this atmosphere and find it intuitively easy to use. The cartoony ambience also fosters a playful regression among users. Bumgardner wanted people to feel like they were „getting away with something" – which surely is a familiar theme in comic strip plots. As a result, it's no surprise that cartoon props proliferate at the Palace. While younger users (adolescents) may be more inclined to don cartoon costumes, older members

frequently use them as well. The psychological significance of the cartoon character probably affects the choice made by the user. People select characters with whom they identify or admire. Some cartoon characters have very specific cultural significance and may even represent archetypal personality types (e.g., Bugs Bunny as the confident trickster; Aladdin's genie as the powerful but benevolent friend). Rather than relying on childhood cartoon figures, some adults wear cartoon avs of a more sophisticated style – some of these classified as „anime". The psychological tone of these avs tend to be more seductive, whimsical, or mysterious.

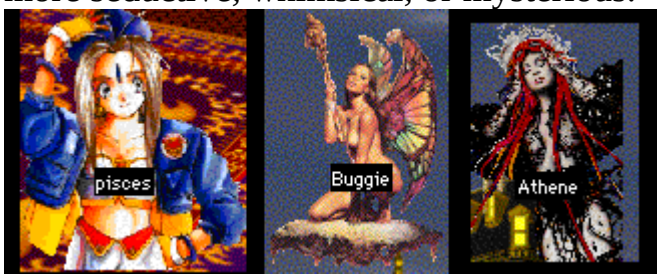


Fig. 4: Cartoon Avatars II

Celebrity Avatars

Fig. 4: Celebrity Avatars

Celebrity avatars tend to follow trends in popular culture. And like items in popular culture, they may quickly become epidemic and then disappear. There may be a variety of motives behind the use of these avs. People may use them to express personality traits or social issues that are associated with the celebrity's image (sensuality, intelligence, power, corruption, rebellion, etc.). The user may identify with, desire, or be poking fun at these attributes. They may hope to bolster their self-esteem and identity by establishing their connection to the celebrity. They may simply wish to display a knowledge of current events in pop culture. Celebrity avs also advertise one's specific interests in entertainment in order to find like-minded users: „Hey, I like Seinfeld! Anyone else out there like Seinfeld?"

Evil Avatars

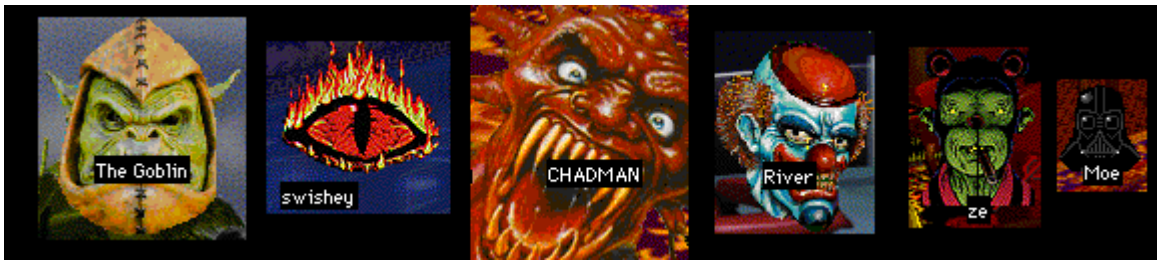


Fig. 5: Evil Avatars

Everyone has a dark or „evil“ side to his or her personality. The definition of „evil“ varies from person to person, although usually it has something to do with malicious, aggressive fantasies and/or feelings of guilt. Note how many Halloween costumes fit this category. As a form of sublimation, evil costumes allow people to safely – and even creatively – express their dark side. While some members may wear an evil av as their facade for the evening (which may reflect their mood at the time), others may „flash“ it as a momentary cue to others. Mess with wizards, for example, and they may flash their evil av as a warning that they’re getting annoyed and may pin, gag, or kill you. On one occasion, I witnessed a male come on to an attractive female member wearing a real face prop. When her attempts to brush him off failed, she flashed a nefarious looking skull at him. He quickly backed off. Some people may use evil or aggressive avatars as a way (consciously or unconsciously) to alienate or „put off“ other people. This might indicate their anxiety about intimacy and being vulnerable.

Real Face Avatars

Fig. 6: Real Face Avatars

Most users do not use pictures of themselves as their primary avatars. People prefer the partial anonymity of expressing only limited aspects of their personality through imaginative props. Or they simply enjoy the creative fun of experimenting with new identities through their avs. In more rare cases, members find the use of real face avs to be an uncomfortable, dissociative experience. „I have a picture of myself in the prop file but I really don’t like to use it any longer than it takes for me to show it to a new friend“, said River, a wizard. „It is a little disturbing to sit here at home and see myself speaking in cartoon balloons in a non-reality. Whew!!!!“

When users do present pictures of their real faces, it may be a gesture of honesty and/or intimacy – a sign of friendship, or even romance. Showing one's real face av can be a very poignant experience. Several members have described to me encounters when an intimate conversation culminated in their companion showing a picture of themselves. „That moment will stay with me for a long time to come", one member stated, „The value I placed on that particular moment was, friendship, trust, a sense of oneness." This same member described how there seems to be a pattern when an entire group feels compelled to use their real faces – what he called „face nite". For that period of time, the intimacy and friendship level reaches a point where people wish to step out of their masks and out of their anonymity. They want be as „real" as possible.

Some members develop an entire set of real face avatars. Cleo, for example, designed each different one to convey a specific interpersonal message, such as „Hi!", „I'm sleeping" (a.k.a. BRB), and „Gimme Kiss."

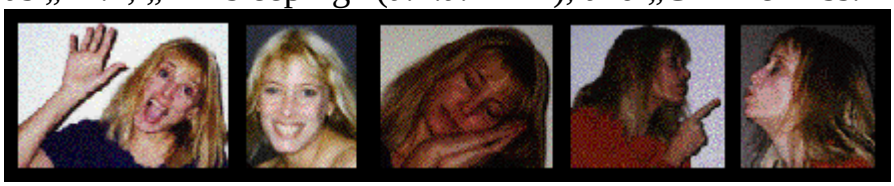


Fig. 7: Cleo

Idiosyncratic Avatars

Fig. 8: Idiosyncratic Avatars

These avatars become strongly associated with a specific member – almost as if it is that person's trademark. In some cases the avatar may be highly unusual or creative. Sometimes it is quite simple. Yet its association to the particular user is so strong that others experience it uniquely as that person. While trading props is a common practice, the owner of an idiosyncratic av rarely gives it away. It would be like giving one's identity to someone else to use. Conscientious members also don't „steal" (i.e., screen capture) an idiosyncratic av and use it as their own. They respect its integrity. If someone does steal and attempts to wear an idio av, they must be willing to put up with criticism by the friends of the owner.

Positional Avatars

Fig. 9: Positional Avatars

These avatars are designed by the member to be placed into specific positions within the Palace rooms. The avatar may be created for a certain type of environment (e.g., a sky or water avatar), or may be designed specifically for a single room or even a very specific spot within a room (e.g., a favorite chair). These avatars illustrate how the graphics of the Palace rooms are *not* simply „background“ that have little impact on behavior. Some members are exquisitely sensitive to the graphical environment. Creating props to match and interact with the features of the room is a highly creative activity. Such avatars also are a sign of status. By displaying them, the member is demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the Palace environment as well as technical know-how in prop editing.

Power Avatars

Fig. 10: Power Avatars

Power avatars are symbols of... well... power. Many, if not all, people have conscious or unconscious fantasies of omnipotence. Who wouldn’t want strength and invulnerability? These types of avs seem to be most common among male adolescent users. In some cases the power theme is benign. Sometimes not, which may be a variation of the „evil“ avatar. Because competition invariably accompanies displays of power, members seem to vie with each other in creating the most „awesome“ power av. This competition is probably more common among the adolescent users. Members who persistantly display power avs may be troubled by underlying feelings of helplessness and insecurity.

Seductive Avatars

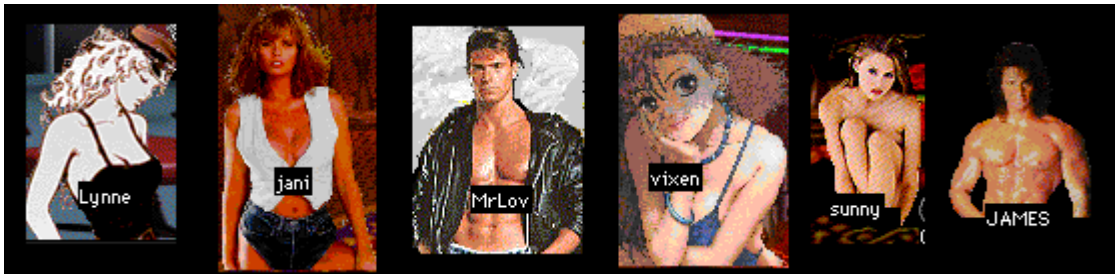


Fig. 11: Seductive Avatars

Frontal nudity, including uncovered breasts, are not permitted at the Palace. Offenders first are warned by wizards, prop-gagged (forced into the standard smiley), and, if necessary, disconnected from the server. Adapting to these house rules, some users create avatars of partially naked or scantily clothed figures. Mischievious members sometimes push the envelope by wearing avs that test the limits and ambiguities of the rules. Supreme court justices have had a hard time defining what is pornographic, so the task has been no easier for the officials who run the EC sites. Even though the rules have become very specific about what body parts can and cannot be visible in an av, borderline cases always pop up[1].

Female seductive avatars tend to be more common than male – although these female avs sometimes are „manned“ by male users[2]. In fact, the general impression among members is that males are more likely to prop up as females, especially seductive females, than women dressing up as males.

Members usually wear seductive avs to draw attention to themselves. This works very well. Male users, especially guests, quickly flock to a sexy female form. The owner may be interested in harmless flirting, or (less frequently) be advertising his or her availability for cybersex. I heard one story about someone’s office friend who, when frustrated on the job, says „I need a Palace break“ He then signs onto the Palace dressed as a sexy female and lures guys into bedrooms. Being sexy not only gets you attention. It also gives you power and control over others.

Some people wearing seductive avs wish to be admired as an attractive, sexy individual, without necessarily being interested in flirting or cybersex. „I have some very sexy stuff given to me by friends (all men!)“, said one female member. „What do they say about me? Not quite sure, except that I would love to be younger and more beautiful and some of my avatars are that indeed.“

The competition in creating and displaying props is especially visible for se-

[1] Cf. Suler, The Bad Boys of Cyberspace (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/badboys.html).
[2] Cf. Suler, Gender Switching in Cyberspace (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/genderswap.html).

ductive avatars. „It's interesting how some of the women at the Palace are getting into more and more elaborate sexy props. Almost as if it's a contest", noted one member. „But then, some of the guys too are into ‚comparing' props!" For men, the competition usually involves power props, rather than seductive ones. As one member stated, „the stag with the biggest rack thing, ey?"

A seductive, sexy, or simply „attractive" avatar can have a powerful impact on other members. One member described how his prop of a cartoon animal didn't seem to be getting him much attention from females. Most of them wouldn't talk to him. Curious about whether he could alter this situation, he searched the net and found a picture of Brad Pitt which he turned into a prop. The result?... Lots of attention. If he happened to be wearing his cartoon prop and found that he was being ignored by a woman, he would move to another room, switch to Brad Pitt, and then return. Or he would switch to Pitt right in front of her. Nine times out of ten, he said, the woman would strike up a conversation with him even if he hadn't said a word. He even established a relationship with someone who eventually wanted to meet him face-to-face. „The pic got her attention", he concluded, „but in the end it was me that won her over." The curious thing about this phenomenon is that members *know* that people are not their avatars. Just because a prop is pretty to look at doesn't mean that the user is. Nevertheless, that seductive av has tremendous drawing power. Perhaps some people enjoy the illusion of interacting with (and hopefully winning over) an attractive person. Perhaps, as many critics of contemporary culture claim, some people can't resist the temptation of superficial appearances, despite knowing better. Or perhaps some people are just curious, „Who *IS* that person using that sexy av?"

Other members may display seductive avs simply to be admired for their skill in knowing how to create a seductive av. Because the Palace often feels like an ongoing party where people are going to flirt, playfully compete, vie for attention, and strut their stuff, it is almost a prerequisite that every experienced member owns a seductive av of some type. „Getting away with something" is an intrinsic component of the Palace culture, as Bumgardner intended. Having at least one seductive av is a cultural must.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. As one member said, „I don't really think that sexy type props are for me, just wouldn't be a true representation of what I'm about."

Other Avatars

Fig. 12: Other Avatars

Whenever we social scientists go about categorizing things, we always end up with a miscellaneous or „other" category. There is such a wide variety of avatars that it's impossible to neatly classify them all. The same is true of personality styles (which is the origin of the prop). Here let me briefly mention just a few other types of avatars.

- *Odd/shocking avatars* are unusual, strange, and sometimes downright bizarre pictures – perhaps revealing people who like to surprise, goof on, or even startle and outrage others. Truly bizarre pictures might make you wonder about the person's grasp of social appropriateness, or even their mental health. Such very unusual avs are most popular among adolescents – for whom extreme behavior is a way to express independence and individuality, and to test the limits.
- *Abstract avatars* may be used by people who enjoy enjoy symmetry, are good (non-verbal) conceptual thinkers, and/or are inclined towards visual artistic endeavors.
- *Billboard* avatars are announcements of some sort – political, philosophical, personal. They are used by those who have something to say and are not reluctant to display their thoughts in a commercialized type format.
- *Lifestyle avatars*, which are quite common and varied, depict some significant aspect of a person's life – usually something to do with occupation, hobby, or personal habit. It may be a way to attract like-minded individuals.
- *Matching avatars* are designed to accompany each other and indicate the connection or bonding between the pair of members. Considerable imaginative and technical skills may go into creating such avatars.
- *Clan avatars* – are worn by members of the same social group, some might even say „gang". These avs tend to be similar in basic design with slight variations to differentiate each one from the others. As such, each user announces his/her allegiance to the clan by adopting its collective visual appearance, while also maintaining some measure of individuality. It reminds me of the songs in some bird species. The species identifies itself and its members by a basic template that serves as the collective song. Yet each individual bird adds a small unique variation to that template in order to signify its individuality. Clan avs are found almost exclusively among adolescents for whom belonging to a peer group – and conforming to its standards – is a developmental hallmark.
- *Animated avatars* contain motion, such as an eye tearing, a bird flying, or a flag waving. By visually diplaying „behavior" they can express a wide and subtle range of psychological meaning. Tapping a finger, blinking one's eyes, banging one's head against the wall – there are infinite expressive possibilties. The motion usually is cyclical and repetitious, which – depending on the type of avatar – may convey a feeling of persistance, determination, mindlessness, or rhythmic peacefulness.

Bigger is Not Better

The default size for an avatar is about 40x40 pixels. That's about as big as your average computer icon. When members create their first avatar, it's usually this size. They're pretty happy with their accomplishment, until they realize that other people have much *bigger* props. It takes a bit more know-how to master the technique of building large avs. Some members quickly get into a competitive feeling about whose is biggest – although the contest quickly ends at about 130x130 pixels, which is the technical limit.

Are there significant psychological differences in who uses big and small props? People who like power avs tend to like big avs, especially big power avs. People may rely on prop size to gain attention and admiration. I've heard some members state that younger users, especially male adolescents, like large props, while women tend to wear smaller props in general than men. These hypotheses certainly are amenable to quantitative research.

The general consensus among Palatians is that „bigger is not better." Big avs sometimes are considered impolite. They take up a lot of precious space in a crowded room. They're a bit ostentatious. What matters more than size is the quality and style of your avatar. What matters is how you apply it to express yourself. „It's not the size of the prop, but how you use it."

Prop Evolution

Bumgardner designed the Palace not as a game with imposed plots and rules, but as a open social environment in which users would „make of it what they will." As a result, the culture is changing and evolving according to the psychological needs of the population. Because members have most control over their props, these elements are probably incisive visual signs of the transitory ebb and flow, and overall developmental path, of Palace life.

In my e-mail interviews with Bumgardner[3], he compared the history of props to biological evolution:

„This last week I read „Naturalist" a memoir by the biologist Edward O. Wilson, and a fine piece of writing. My intent was to read something completely unrelated to the Palace, to take my mind off it, but I found Wilson's descriptions of island ecologies particularly relevant, as it turned out. In some ways one can compare Props to Plumage. More interesting, attractive (or I might even say „powerful") props tend to propagate, while less interesting, ugly ones don't. Some props have had incredible staying power – were created a long time ago and are still around, while others

[3] Cf. On being a God. An Interview with Joe Bumgardner (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/jbum.html).

have had relatively short cycles. In addition there has been a marked evolution in the quality and size of props. A typical scene in Harry's bar this evening is quite different from a typical scene two months ago. You see more large elaborate props, and more sexy props. There was a big influx of sexy lingerie-clad female props at the Valentine's party and interestingly those have continued. Where competitive principles come in is that the overall quality of the props has been rising with time, as people keep up with the Joneses, and teach other how to make better looking props."

Fig. 13: The 1996 Valentine's Day Party
The Valentine's Day Party was a big event at the Palace. Some members specifically created props for the ocassion. Note the mixture of real face and cartoon avatars. Quite a few seductive props appeared for the first time that evening, and continued to proliferate afterwards. BTW, my avatar is a picture of Rudolph Valentino.

Surely, there is a „survival of the fittest" among props. Those with real staying power are those that best capture universal human themes – such as sex, aggression, power, and spirituality. Other long-lasting props are those specifically adapted to the Palace environment (e.g., „be right back" and „I survived the lag" signs), and those that are icons of contemporary culture (e.g., cans of Spam, Winnie the Poo, the Three Stooges). Carrying the biological analogy even further, Bumgardner suggested that the categories may be more specific than outlined previously in this article. For example – cartoon animals, cars, Japanese anime women. Those which are not „fit" eventually disappear into extinction. Those that *are* fit survive, develop, become more refined. The overall trend towards more variety and subtlety in props (not unlike biological evolution) points to a basic human need that Palace successfully satisfies – the need to pursue variety, to push the envelop, to advance.

This diversity is boosted by the need for personal expression of an individual's identity. The most fit types of props survive, but people also want and need to be unique – at least this is true of American culture. As Sammy Davis might have said, „I gotta be me." People prefer not to wear the exact avs that other people are wearing. The results are avatars that do not fall into the usual categories or species types and an almost infinite variety of subtle differences within the categories. This doesn't necessarily mean that avs become more complex or elaborate over time. While this trend does tend to enhance individuality and uniqueness, avatar complexity can get unwieldy, inefficient, overly ostentatious. A push towards elegant simplicity counterbalances the quest for complexity, resulting in developmental ebbs and flows of avatar intricacy.

A clear exception to this basic rule about avatar individuality are the clan props. Members sacrifice the quest for a totally unique visual appearance in order to belong to the group. Clan props are most likely to develop among adolescents. They also will tend to evolve in a large, changing population where some users will attempt to gain status, influence, and identity by joining an established group, rather than by forging ahead on one's own.

Taking It Personal

Like masks of any kind, avatars hide and reveal at the same time. Behind it, people can conceal some personal things about themselves, but the av also selectively amplifies other aspects of their personalities. It may reveal something about the member that otherwise is not immediately obvious – maybe not even obvious if you met that person in real life. Maybe not even obvious to the owners themselves. What users express in their props is not always a conscious choice. Sometimes it's unconscious. People may simply say that they are wearing a particular av because „I like it." When asked, they're not sure what it says about them. But other people may know.

On a few occasions at the Palace I suggested to the group that we play a „prop game." The game goes like this. One at a time, people take turns standing before the group and trying on a few of their favorite avatars. Free associating to the image, the rest of us toss out ideas about how the prop looks, its psychological connotations, its possible symbolisms. The question then becomes – does this say something about the owner? More often than not, it does. The avatar is like a Rorschach inkblot, or the Draw-a-House/Person/Tree Test, or any work of art. It is selected from personal imagination. Consciously or unconsciously, people condense a multitude of meaning into it. They project their personality into it – who they are, who they wish to be, what they fear, what moves them. In the prop game, by free-associating, the other members help unpack all the feelings and meanings

condensed into the avatar. It's very much like interpreting dreams. Of course, the other members may be projecting their „own stuff" into the ideas that they toss out about a fellow Palatian's avatars. But that's OK. In fact, it says something about how they are perceiving and reacting towards their fellow Palatian. It's what psychoanalysts call „transference".

People seem drawn to the prop game, probably for the same reasons that they are attracted to Palace as the haven of avatars. The Palace can be an entertaining, self-exploratory arena for expressing one's ideas, feelings, and creativity. It encourages people to experiment with new identities – all in a highly visual fashion. Casually, and intuitively, people are playing the „prop game" all the time as they socialize at the Palace. They display their different avatars and people give them feedback about it. In the best of circumstances, one learns something about oneself as well as others. It feels like „playing", and indeed it is. Playing is just another way to explore identity.

There is a serious side to playing. You don't steal someone else's toys. One sure sign of how attached members get to their avatars is their reaction when someone tries to „steal" one – especially if it's an idiosyncratic avatar, one that you put a lot of work into, or your „primary" or „home" avatar that you spend most of your time wearing. Your identity is tightly packed into these precious nuggets. That's how people recognize you as unique. When someone takes it with a screen capture and then wears it (which only takes a few minutes), they are stealing a piece of your identity, stealing your individuality.

One evening when I entered Harry's Bar, the social center of the Main Mansion site, I immediately was warned by a friend, „Watch out! Nightmare is stealing props." I quickly noticed that all of the people I knew were wearing the generic smiley faces rather than their favorite avatars. Except Nightmare. He wore River's idiosyncratic avatar, which, for a second, disoriented me, then made me angry. I switched off my own primary avatar, the gray owl, and automatically defaulted to the generic smiley. But it was too late. Nightmare had already captured my owl and put it on. I added my annoyance to those of others in the room. We told Nightmare this was unacceptable behavior, that people took their avs seriously, that what he was doing amounted to stealing. Our concern didn't seem to have too much of an impact on him. Adding insult to injury, he duplicated my owl and spread copies of it all around the room. With the „clean" command, I erased all the loose owl props, but later on I found others in the Armory. I indeed felt that something important had been snatched cavalierly from me – that my visual territory, my *identity* had been violated.

Not all people who take others' props are attempting to aggressively attack,

manipulate, or steal someone else's sense of self. Sometimes it's just a naive mistake. If you explain to the person how it's a faux pas, they usually will take your av off with an apology. Or a friend may take and put on your prop as a goof (maybe they indeed admire or want something from you), which usually is accepted by all in the spirit of fun.

One member told me the story of a friend who tried to change her „image" (prop) after her primary avatar had been copied. She could barely bring herself to do it. After a week or so of trying different themes and styles, she gave up. Eventually, she tried again and did create some new (idiosyncratic) props that built on her original theme.

Members who become prop design experts are especially sensitive to the themes of personal expression in their artwork. They like to cultivate their own personal style of avatars. This style makes them one of a kind. It also provides some continuity to their identity and recognition by others, even though they may be switching avatars. It is their „style" that is recognized by others. For one specialist, it may be fantasy anime figures. For another, who lives in Alaska, it may be themes revolving around „cold". One prop expert, an artist who builds her own avatars from scratch, commented on how she works within specific „parameters" that will make her stand out. „I know with my art, if you don't have ‚gimmicks' you can go unnoticed or easily copied." She also noticed similar tendencies in other members. „When someone stumbles upon those self-induced parameters that get them noticed, they invariably stick with that persona and build on it."

The word „avatar" means „incarnation" or „manifestation". It is an appropriate choice to describe the icons people use to visually represent the facets of their identity. A more specific definition, from Hindu mythology, is the incarnation of a god. Perhaps, unconsciously, people take their avs seriously because it indeed feels like a divine product. To place oneself into a form created from one's own imagination is the essence of creativity. It's God-like.

Avatar Collections (That's Me All Over)

We all have different sides to our identity. Social psychologists would call them our „social roles" that surface in the variety of situations and relationships that make up our lives. Psychoanalysts would describe them as the constellation of „introjects", „internalizations", and „identifications" that comprises our intrapsychic world. On a daily basis, we juggle and shift between several rather distinct selves, sometimes without being fully aware that we are doing it. How, when, and why these different facets of our identity manifest themselves is the story of our lives.

In the multimedia communities of cyberspace, you can tell a lot about people by examining their collection of avatars and how they use them. Each avatar reflects a distinct aspect of the individual's personality and lifestyle – whether it is a mood, an interest pattern, a social role, one's attitudes and values, or a wished-for state of being. During my research on the Palace, I've often thought about how fascinating it would be to examine a member's whole collection, or at least his or her favorite avatars (since some members have hundreds!).

Doing such an analysis would be a very personal affair, so I have hesitated to ask anyone to participate in such a study. However, some readers of this article – like *Legnek* and *Nacey* [4] – volunteered to contribute a sample of their avs, along with an explanation of what those avs mean to them. Other readers are welcome to do the same. Here are some of the avs in my own collection:

Fig. 13: Gray owl

Gray owl – „AsKi" is my primary or „home" avatar. I spend the large majority of my time wearing this icon. I specifically chose this picture for several reasons. It is non-threatening. I did not hide the fact that I was doing research on the Palace in addition to socializing there, so I wanted to appear as benign as possible. The fact that it is a small prop adds to its innocuous quality, as well as makes it very portable and easy to fit into even a crowded room. An owl also is observant, non-intrusive, and „wise" – characteristics that I hoped would positively flavor people's reactions to me (and that I'd like to claim as my qualities). Also, the gender of the figure is unclear. My intention here was to allow other members initially to perceive AsKi as male or female according to their own projections (although I always revealed my gender when asked). Curiously, as I moved about the rooms of the Palace, I noticed myself looking for comfortable perches for my owl. Often I found myself sitting above and on the outside of a circle of people socializing – perhaps on a chair near the door, or on a picture frame on the wall. Was I acting like a bit of an outsider – observant, quiet, benign... maybe a bit distant? I would be lying if I said these qualities did not apply to me in „real" life. Many times I would have to catch myself falling back into this detached „observer" (lurker) mode. I didn't *just* want to do research. I wanted to get down, socialize, and have fun too.

Fig. 14: The Earth

[4] See Legnek's Avatar Collection (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/legnek.html), Nacey's Avatar Collection (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/nacey.html).

The Earth – This is next in line as my most frequently used avatar. It's a positional prop. Several of the rooms at the main Palace site (the Mansion) are actually outdoor scenes (a beach, the Moor, the front yard of the Palace, etc.). In these locales I place myself into the sky. I was inspired to create this avatar when I first visited Nrutas – an outer space scene where computer geeks (I use the term affectionately) like to hang out. The first time I sat silently in the Nrutas sky, a new member arrived and said to a fellow Palatian, „I don't remember that Earth being there in the background gif? Is that new?" Perhaps this says something about my personality. Perhaps I like to blend in. I *am* ecology minded, like to wear Earth tone clothes, am interested in spirituality, love outer space fiction (a Star Trek fan, of course), and, as a kid, very much wanted to become an astronaut. All of this, and probably more, is condensed into that image. This avatar reminds me of the final scene of 2001: A Space Odyssey, when the „Star Child" returns to Earth.

Fig. 15: James Taylor

James Taylor – This picture of James Taylor dancing with his guitar is from his „New Moon Shine" album. When I'm in my partying „let's get down" mood I'll dance this figure across the carpet in Harry's Bar. Even quiet people like to let their exhibitionist side out once in a while. This also is a good example of a „Wannbe Prop". I play guitar and piano, but am average at it. If I magically could inherit anyone's musical abilities, it would be JT. I think everyone has a Wannabe Prop of some kind in their collection. A humanistic psychologist might say that it is an icon showing their path towards self-actualization. Using this prop also drove home for me the fact that avatars are powerful signposts for signaling to and attracting like-minded people. If not for this prop, I probably would not have connected to several other Palatians who also are JT fans.

Fig. 16: Freud wearing a propeller beanie

Freud wearing a propeller beanie – As a psychologist, I've always been interested in psychoanalytic theory (though I warn my students not to take any one theory too seriously... hence the beanie). I sometimes jokingly put on this avatar when people ask me questions about psychology, or if someone in the room, not knowing I'm a psychologist, says something to the group like „Maybe we should ask a shrink about that!" I enjoy psychology, and sometimes I enjoy making fun of it. On a few occasions I switched to this prop when obnoxious guests were harassing people in the room. As „Freud", I tried to find out why they were being so insulting in the hopes of either talking them down, or, if necessary, encouraging them to leave. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not.

Fig. 17: Dressed to the Nines

Dressed to the Nines – This silhouette figure of a man dressed in a formal suit is a „flirting avatar". I've used it (on rare occasions, I might add) to approach women who seemed in the mood to flirt. It's my attempt to assume the persona of a sophisticated, debonair man-about-town. Another wannabe avatar? It also came in handy for those nights when everyone in the room was in the mood to dress formally.

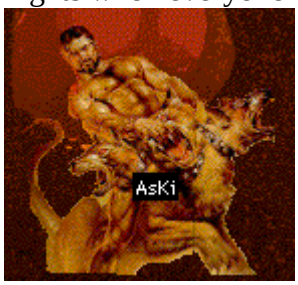


Fig. 18: Hercules taming Cerberus

Hercules taming Cerberus – Let there be no mistake. This is a power prop. What could be more powerful than Hercules wrestling down the multi-headed dog who guards the gates of hell? Yet another wannabe prop? Power avatars, not surprisingly, tend to be big, and this is by far my largest. Some people are very impressed by it, others are put off by its size and aggressive quality. So I tend not to display it too often for fear of intruding on other people's personal space or offending their tastes. Technically, this was the most difficult prop I created. I had to dissect the original image into nine separate squares and then reassemble them in the Palace prop editor. As such, it was my competitive attempt to demonstrate that I knew how to make big props.

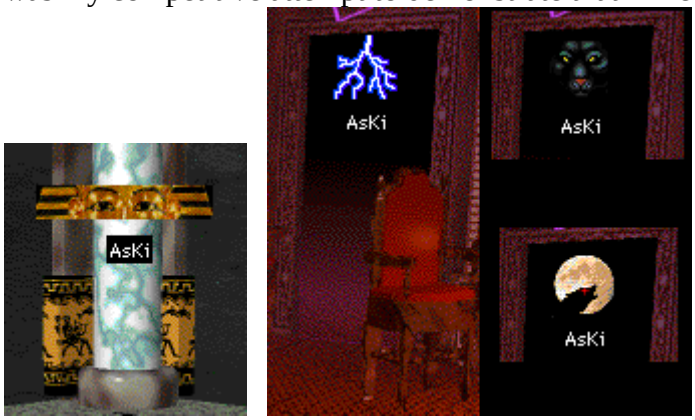


Fig. 19: Other positional avs

Other positional avs – I love to create avs that I can place into specific spots in specific rooms. I selected the leopard's face, the wolf howling by the moon, and the lightning bolt because they have a black background and therefore blend perfectly into dark doorways. I enjoy interacting with the Palace environment. Perhaps this symbolically indicates how I like to „fit in". Sometimes, when I'm feeling left out of a conversation in the room, I'll play with this props in the background. It usually draws attention to me and brings me back into the conversation.

When we compare different people's avatar collections, some general patterns emerge. Many people have persona that are seductive, powerful, formal/sophisticated, silly/playful, and artistic/poetic. These may represent universal or archetypal sectors of personality. Most people cherish at least one original („old") avatar because it represents their birth identity in the Palace community. It's like an old, reliable friend. Almost everyone has a primary, all-purpose av that they use most of the time. It's the familiar home base, the image they feel most identified with and most comfortable wearing. Often it's one of those original, birth avatars. But sometimes it's a relatively new one. Active members are always creating new avs. One's collection is a balance of new and old persona, which reflects the balance between experimenting with new identities and holding onto the familiar, stable aspects of self. The size and variations in one's collection probably reflects the extent to which the person explores and experiments with personal identity. Many people have a secret avatar that they use when they don't want others to know who they are, as well as an avatar they wear when they're with friends – an appearance that readily identifies them to their friends, often that birth or primary avatar. Curiously, many people have an av which they really like, but aren't sure why they like it. It is a conscious reminder of an unconscious aspect of identity.

Visual Social Grease

By this point it should be obvious that props make interacting easier and more efficient by providing a visual means to express oneself. They are very useful communication tools. On the simplest level, they act as conversation pieces. If you can think of nothing else to say, express an interest in someone's prop. Talking about props is one of the most common topics of discussion at the Palace. It greases the social interaction, especially with people whom you are meeting for the first time. It's like discussing the weather – except people are more personally invested in their props than they are in whether it's rainy or sunny.

On a more complex level, changes in avatars convey changes in mood and intention, without the person necessarily having to speak (type). Many members have told me that what they are wearing affects how they behave, as well as influences how others will react to them. Wear a female seductive prop, or even just a pleasant looking female prop, and you will draw attention, whether you want it or not. If you're annoyed with someone and want to drive them away, put on that skull prop. One member said, „When I use my animated props" (props that show motion) „you can be sure I'm in a jovial mood." Another commented, „The ability to adjust a prop in any situation to meet the needs of the individual at that particular moment makes the Palace unique as compared to the rest of the cyber chat sites."

In some cases the prop is used in a very specific situation to convey a very specific meaning. One member described how he uses a prop of a man with his hand in the air as a „high-five“ to greet one of his friends. „I also have a white dog with a stick and a bandera on the end that I use to signify my exit... packing it in for the nite, if you will. Some of the regulars note the avatar's presence and immediately say goodnight to me.“ The icon, he concluded, sometimes works much faster than key strokes.

What follows is a log excerpt illustrating some typical cyberspace flirting behavior – in this case facilitated and amplified by prop play. The key participants are SweetyPie, whose well-dressed female avatar is positioned in the sky at the Palace front gates, and AsKi (hey!... I'm allowed. It's participant-observation research![5]):

SweetyPie: I look like a bride, I need a groom
Misty: dont look here hahaha
AsKi: (changes to avatar of a formally-dressed man and joins SweetyPie in the sky)
Will you marry me, SweetyPie!
SweetyPie: yes dear yes
Misty: Wow...SP...a proposal online 5 mins..
SweetyPie: my groom!
Misty: thats power
AsKi: (changes to prop of the earth) A match made in heaven!
Misty: I will sing at the wedding
SweetyPie: yes
Misty: hahaha
SweetyPie: He is now the world to me (changes to star-shaped prop)
Misty: hahahaha
AsKi: and you my shining star!
SweetyPie: *a brand new world*!!!!! (plays „kiss“ sound)
AsKi: (changes to a lips prop – plays „kiss“ sound)
SweetyPie: now he is all lips (plays „kiss“ sound)
SweetyPie: oh my groom
AsKi: SweetyPie, we can't go on meeting like this, people will find out!
Misty: swooning....
SweetyPie: ahhh yes well what can we do, love is in the air
SweetyPie: hahahaha
AsKi: (changes to flying bird prop) you are the wind beneath my wings
SweetyPie: lolol
SweetyPie: awwww so cute
AsKi: ah, shucks

Entire social events may revolve around specific themes that are highly amenable to avatar displays. Members may specifically create props for planned

[5] Cf. Suler, One of Us. Participiant Observation Research at the Palace (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/partobs.html).

celebrations, as in a St. Patty's Day party or the historical Valentines Day party. Some special theme gatherings, like a Hawaiian get-together (see Fig. 20) seem to pop up almost spontaneously, as if it was spontaneous theater. Showing off, trading, and talking about props is a big part of the festivity. At the Valentine's Party special visual events were planned, such as the Dating Game[6], the Props Contest and Showoff[7], and the rather mystical meeting at Nrutas (see Fig. 21), where Bumgardner displayed some his visual magic with iptscrae scripts. The wizard „flash light" induction ceremonies (see Fig. 22) proved to be a fascinating blend of tradition and humor, thanks to graphical touches. All of these events were quite captivating, to a large extent because they were so visual. When the creator of another Palace site once asked me how he could draw people to his server, a few solutions seemed very obvious – prop contests, theme parties, and special visual events. These kinds of events now are springing up at Palace sites all over the internet.

Fig. 20: The Hula Party

I accidentally stumbled on this Hula Party one night while cruising the Palace. Apparently, the party was a spontaneous event. Note the use of theme specific avatars, props added to the background image, and painting onto the background – all as decorations to visually enliven the event. Although I didn't have any Hawaiian type props in my collection, several of the members generously gave me some of theirs. Here you can see me attempting to assemble the props onto my avatar. Once appropriately dressed, I changed my name to „TanakaOwl". Members often alter their hand.

[6] One of the special events at the Valentine's Party; see http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/dategame.html.

[7] Another special event at the Valentine's Party; see http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/avcontest.html.

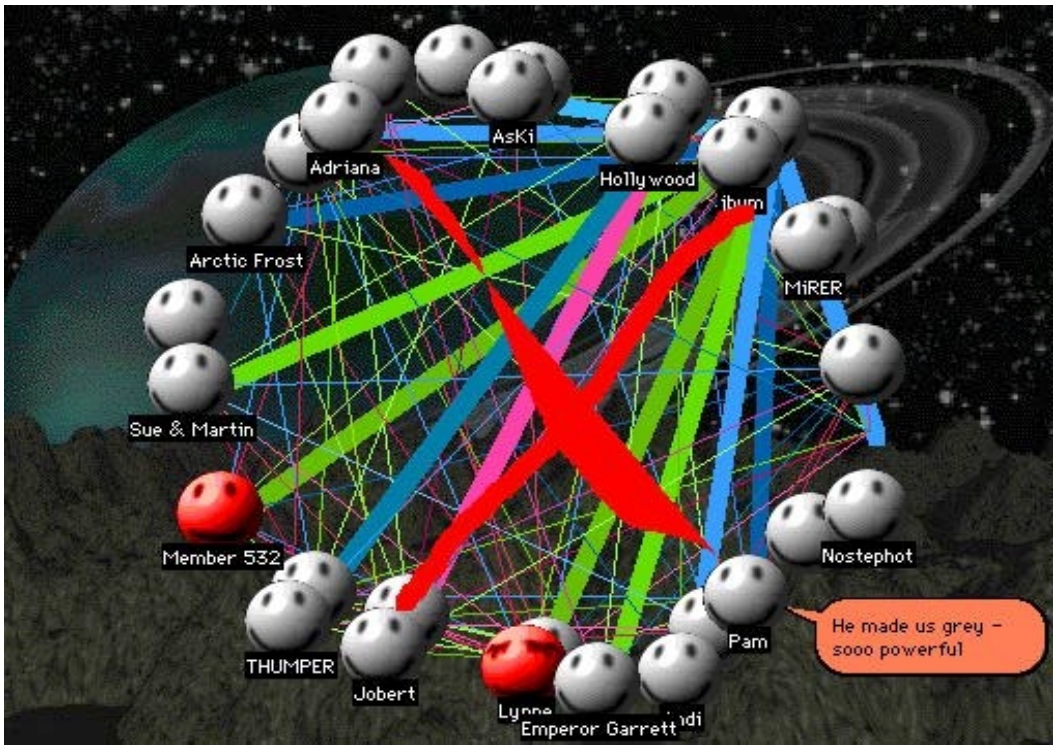


Fig. 21: jbum Demonstrates Visual „Magic“ with Prop Scripts

At the end of the Valentine’s Party, Jbum invited members up to Nrutas where he demonstrated some scripts. Gathered in a circle, the members were turned to plain grey smiley icons, interconnected by lines of light, and „doubled“ with another smiley appearing behind the original. The display was quite impressive. It also conveyed some underlying psychological, even mystical symbolism: (a) „deep down inside, we are all alike“, (b) „we are all interconnected“ (unity), and, (c) each of us has a double self – inner/outer, real/imagined, real/virtual.

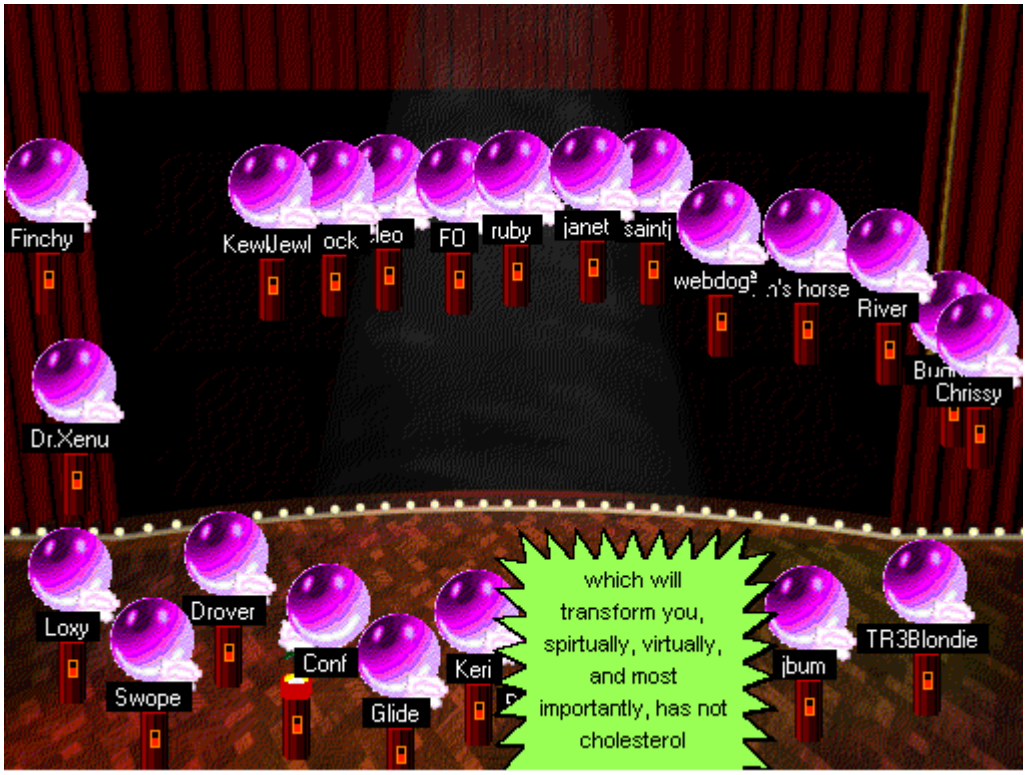


Fig. 22: A „Flash Light“ Wizard Induction Ceremony

Thanks to graphical touches, the wizard induction ceremonies contained both elements of tradition and humor.

Aberrant Av Behavior

With the new visual dimension of cyberspace socializing comes new ways for people to be aberrant. Like all aberrant behavior, „deviant“ behavior at the Palace ranges from mild to severe[8].

Mischievous Pranks – As Bumgardner intended, people do try to “get away with something“ by playing jokes on their fellow users. Usually the naive guests are the victims. Sometimes it’s just a good-natured prank. Sometimes it has an edge of hostility. Using the brush for painting on the background room image, some users adorn the walls with graffiti, obscene drawings or words. Other mischievous members smear black over an entire room, or they fill the entire room with props, leaving newbies totally confused as to where they are or what’s happening. Freud would want to label them „anal expulsive personalities“. By „spoofing“ someone with the „msay“ command, you can throw your voice to make the cartoon text balloon pop out of someone else’s head. Or you can make the words hang in mid-air with no body attached. A member, rather inappropriately, kept putting the words „I’m gay!“ into the mouth of another user as he was trying to carry on a conversation with me. Using msay like this may indicate the person’s inability to contain some thought or feeling, while also being unable to own up to that thought or feeling for fear of how others will react.

Sometimes, it’s hard even for sympathetic people to resist the antics and game-playing. One night, although trying to remain a neutral observer, I eventually found myself as an accomplice to another member in a prank where we set up an unmanned female prop in the spa pool. We used „msay“ to talk *through* the prop while also talking *to* it as if it were another user. Essentially, it was a virtual ventriloquist act. „Honey“ (the prop) was rather seductive towards the guests, and the guests all thought it was a „real“ person. It was quite funny, although perhaps a bit mean to the poor naive guests who were unaware of the msay command.

- *Flooding* – Users who make rapid, multiple changes of their avatars – especially large avatars – may flood the server, resulting in lag that makes it difficult for people to talk. Usually the person is not aware that he is causing a problem. But sometimes people do it on purpose. It may be a hostile attempt to gain attention, or a jealous ploy to disrupt the socializing in the room. Wizards will warn, pin, or, if necessary, kill for this offense.
- *Blocking* **–** Members consider it a social faux pas to place your avatar on top of or too close to another person’s prop. Unless the person is a friend who’s in the

[8] For a detailed discussion of deviant behavior and how wizards cope with it cf. Suler, The Bad Boys of Cyberspace (http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/badboys.html).

mood to be close, it's an invasion of personal space. „Please get off me!" and „You're sitting on me!" are two common complaints. Again, some naive users do this without knowing it is inappropriate, or the person may be lagging and unable to move. But some hostile people deliberately accost others by blocking them. Wizards will warn, pin, or, if necessary, kill for this offense.

- *Sleeping* – Sleepers usually are users who have walked away from their computer. They are completely unresponsive when you talk to them. The social norm is to put up a „BRB" (be right back) sign to indicate your unavailability. Sleepers fail to do this. Although sleepers may be found in text-only chat environments, the experience of them is a bit different in multimedia chat. It feels much more eerie to *see* a person (avatar) in front of you, yet the person fails to react.
- *Eavesdropping* – By reducing their avatars to a single pixel and their usernames to only one character, members may try to become „invisible" and secretly listen in on conversations. As a type of „lurker", they are acting on voyeuristic tendencies to avoid intimacy and gain a sense of advantage and power over others. I wonder if chronic eavesdroppers last very long at the Palace. People enjoy so much the ability to express themselves visually through their avatars that it seems self-defeating to avoid this opportunity by hiding. Maybe that says something about eavesdropping. It *is* self-defeating and, literally, self-negating.
- *Borderline Avs* – There are very specific rules about what avatars are acceptable and what ones are not. Unacceptable avs fall into four general categories: overly sexual; overly violent and aggressive; hate avatars (evidence of prejudice concerning gender, homosexuality, religion, ethnicity, and nationality); avatars that promote illegal activities (e.g., drug use). Looking for loopholes or pushing the envelope as far as they can, acting out members sometimes test the limits of the rules.
- *Flashing* – Although nudity in avatars is not permitted at the Palace, some people nevertheless flash their naughty pictures. They may be goofing around with their friends, advertising their availability for cybersex, attempting to shock other people (like the typical exhibitionist), or defiantly and perhaps masochistically begging to be killed by a wizard. In private rooms, behind locked doors, people engaged in cybersex will display pornographic props to one another. Because this is not public behavior, it is not punished.
- *Prop Dropping* – Not quite as brave as the flasher, a prop-dropper will toss an obscene prop into an empty room and then run, so as not to get caught. The exhibitionist and rebellious psychology of the prop-dropper is probably similar to the flasher, with the exception that they attempt to dissociate themselves from their „dropping". In the mind of a Freudian, the scatological implications of this behavior are very signficant.
- *Imposters* – Stealing someone's avatar and wearing it is a no-no. Stealing someone's avatar, wearing it, and also using that person's name (or a variation of it) is a real no-no. You are abducting their entire identity. As a momentary joke to mimic your friends, this behavior is tolerated as fun. But some people are more insidious. I've heard rumors about a few people, in an act of revenge, snatching the identity of the person that offended them. Behaving inappropriately under that identity, they attempted to damage the person's reputation. Pretending to be a wizard or a god can get you into real trouble.
- *Identity Disruption* – One day in Harry's Bar I was greeted by someone I didn't recognize. Something about how he spoke made me uneasy. He acted as if he knew me, but his abstract avatar and name were unfamiliar. After a few minutes, he changed his prop to another abstract design. For some reason, this made me

> more uncomfortable. „Do you know this guy?“ I whispered to another member. „It’s Octagon“, she said. „He’s been changing his name and props lately“.... About a week later, I heard that Octagon was hospitalized. He had been suicidal.

This incident taught me something important about avatars. Unfortunate people suffering from disturbances in their identity may act out their turmoil in the props they wear. A virtual world where you can switch among alternate appearances might attract people suffering from „dissociation“ – the splits in consciousness and identity as a result of trauma, as in the classic multiple personality disorder.

There is a lesson here as well for the average Palatian. Playing with your avatar and username as a way to express yourself can be fun and creative. It’s a fascinating, synergistic combination. But change your prop and/or name too often – especially if you are a relatively new member – and you run into trouble. People won’t recognize you. Your identity de-constructs. In order to be treated like a solid individual, perhaps even to *feel* like a solid individual, you must maintain some level of continuity in either your avatars or username. Most people choose consistency in their username, perhaps varying it slightly for different occasions (e.g., HappyAsKi, McAski, Dr. AsKi). If they are going to experiment with identity expression, they do it mostly with changes in avatars. Despite this experimentation, almost everyone has a primary or home avatar that everyone recognizes as the „real you“. The primary avatar provides the necessary continuity, the core self. It takes time to establish it. Switch avatars too often as a new member and you will probably slow down people’s ability to recognize you. Once your username and a few of your avs are firmly recognized, you have more leeway to express other aspects of yourself through other avs, without your identity becoming too diffused.

In fact, this may be the essence of a „healthy“ Palace life – knowing how to handle that delicate balancing act of experimenting with who you are, while maintaining a stable baseline of public and personal identity.... Is this any different than „real“ life?

It’s Not Just Wallpaper

One afternoon at the Palace I happened to run into someone who was designing his own multimedia environment. He was visiting the Main Palace site to check it out, probably comparing this graphical environment to his own conceptual plans. Considering he was very interested in multimedia communities, I was a bit surprised by his underestimation of avatars and the graphics of the background rooms. „No-one has quite figured out what to do with an avatar to identify themselves“, he said later to me in e-mail, „and the backdrops are largely that, wallpaper.“

At this point in this paper, I surely hope I've demonstrated the invalidity of his first point. As to his second, it seems to me that the background graphics that make up the Palace rooms are anything but „wallpaper" – a word which implies that the graphics are basically inconsequential. In fact, that's a bit of a devaluing attitude towards wallpaper as well. Would wallpaper even exist if it did not significantly influence people's attitudes, moods, perceptions, even how they behave?

I'm sure that wallpaper does have this effect, as do the Palace rooms. For example, people are drawn to Harry's Bar, which is the social center of Palace life at Main. Why? The colors are warm, fuzzy, and inviting; there are chairs for people to sit down; it is a bar which people associate with get-togethers, partying and fun; there is a plush carpet in the middle of the floor which acts as a stage or even a dance floor for people to „get-down" and mix it up with one another. The psychological effect of Harry's Bar is not unlike that of the Study or Chess Room (see Fig. 23) which also contain warm colors, luxurious chairs facing each other, and a fire place. Cohesive subgroups of members have formed in these rooms. Contrast these rooms with Grand Central where the mostly black and white color scheme feels cold, the floor is a stark checker tile, the sparse furniture is knocked over, and, quite bizarrely, a locomotive is crashing through the window. Fewer people gather there. Contrast these again with Nrutas, the outer space scene near a planet that looks like Saturn. You would think it's not a very hospitable place for humans. Yet people often do gather here, with the discussion often focusing on tech talk. A perfect spot for Star Trek fans.

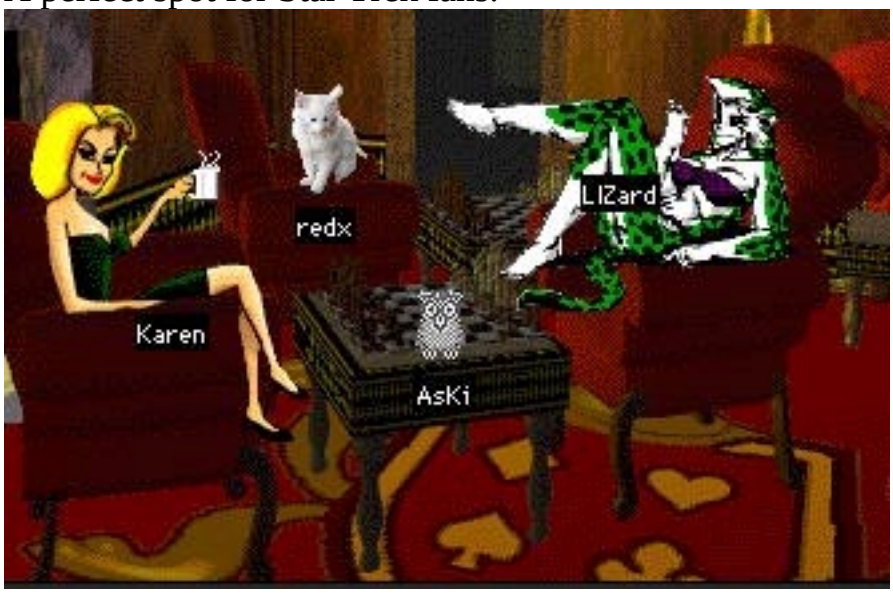


Fig. 23: Chess Room

The Chess Room at the Mansion site is especially comfortable for gatherings of small groups. The circle of chairs around the chess board invariably becomes the nucleus of the group – usually with the core members of the group sitting in those chairs. The people

who frequent the Chess Room at the member's only Mansion site have become a rather distinct subgroup within the Palace population.

What are other popular rooms at Main? The Palace Gate, where users automatically are deposited when they sign on, which makes it the perfect place to greet people as they come in. The Spa (see Fig. 24), where people meet to „bath". The Hallway upstairs, just outside the guest rooms where people can talk in private and get intimate. A graphical pathway or corridor where people tend to walk (and gather along the way) extends from this popular hallway, down the stairs, through the Armory, Game Room, and Red Room, and into the similarly popular Harry's Bar. The Red Room often serves as a „waiting area" for people to socialize as they are waiting to get into the bar, since the room occupancy is limited. This graphical pathway, with Harry's Bar and the Guest Rooms at opposite ends, were the original design of the Palace, with the other rooms added on by links through pictures or fixtures on the walls.

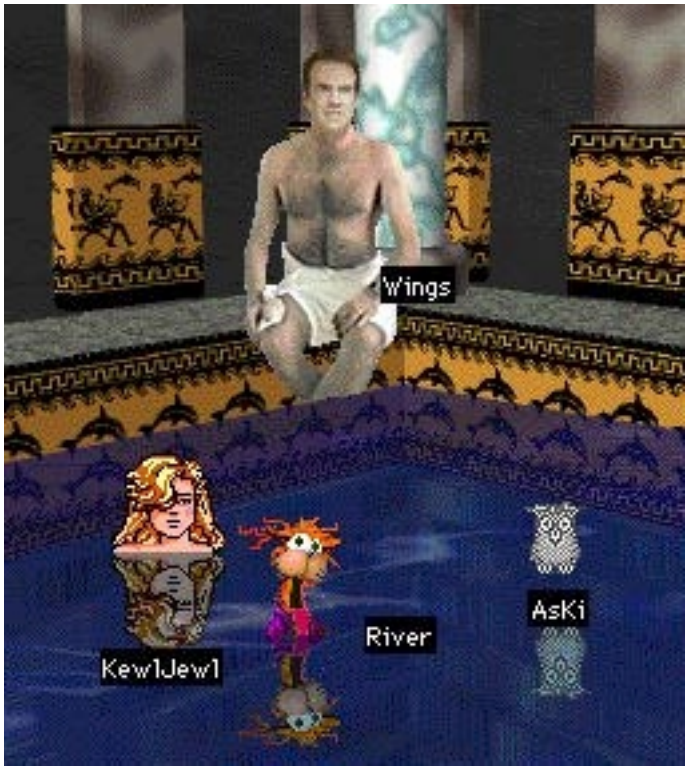


Fig. 24: Bath in the pool

Members enjoy „bathing" while socializing at the spa. Note the reflections in the water which members added to their avatars. This is a good example of how users enjoy interacting with the visual features of the background.

What have been the least populated rooms? The Void, a psychedelic swirl of colors that insults the eyes, looks like it's going to suck you up, and greets you with the message „Abandon Hope all ye who enter here". And let's not forget The Pit – a gloomy, fiery cavern that places horns on your head and a cigarette in your mouth.... Not exactly inviting places, except, perhaps, for trouble-makers who like the fact that the Pit's graphical theme matches their

psyche. Anti-social gangs have claimed it as their home.

Even these unsavory locales are preferred over nothing at all. On occasion, I've traveled to other Palace sites where some of the rooms were under construction, leaving nothing but a black box. When other people popped in and quickly realized there was nothing there but empty nothing, they left in a hurry. People find it boring, and perhaps even disorienting. Backdrops of rooms and scenery give people a sense of place and space. It creates a necessary visual grounding for their virtual experience. Some people avoid the usual text-only chat rooms for similar reasons. With only text scrolling down a window, they feel like they are floating in a void with no visual or spatial frame of orientation.

At the Palace, users can place their avatars anywhere within a room – on the floor, walls, ceiling. But by no means do people move and position their avatars randomly. Even though there are no physical laws to restrict their movement, people behave as if there are. Responding to „gravity", such props as walking figures and cars tend to stay on the floor, while icons of flying or floating things remain up. Sometimes this is a purely unconscious reflex on the part of the user. Sometimes people deliberately play with the laws of physics and space – now obeying them, now defying them. Sit in a chair, or hang upside down from the ceiling. Whatever you like. It's part of the fun of Palace life. Rather than being static wallpaper, the background graphics are a playground. The positional props are a good example of how people consciously enjoy interacting with the visual features of a room. By providing tools for drawing on the background gif and the ability to place props into the scenery (flowers, bottles, artwork, etc.), the designers of Palace are encouraging this play. „Dr. Xenu", a longstanding member of the Palace community, offered some interesting observations on this phenomenon, which he calls „set-dressing":

> There are now simple ways to automate such set-dressing. I have a friend who habitually decorates one or two particular rooms in the same way whenever we meet. There was also someone, for a while, who was relentlessly posting a pair of cherubs to the wall in the bedrooms of members' palace. I would find the cherubs there at all hours, and eventually began deleting them (though I liked them) to see when they would return -- sometimes in as little as 15 minutes! I never did find the unseen decorator.

Such behaviors allow people to personalize the environment for themselves and friends, or perhaps feel some sense of personal impact or „ownership" by leaving one's „mark" on the territory.

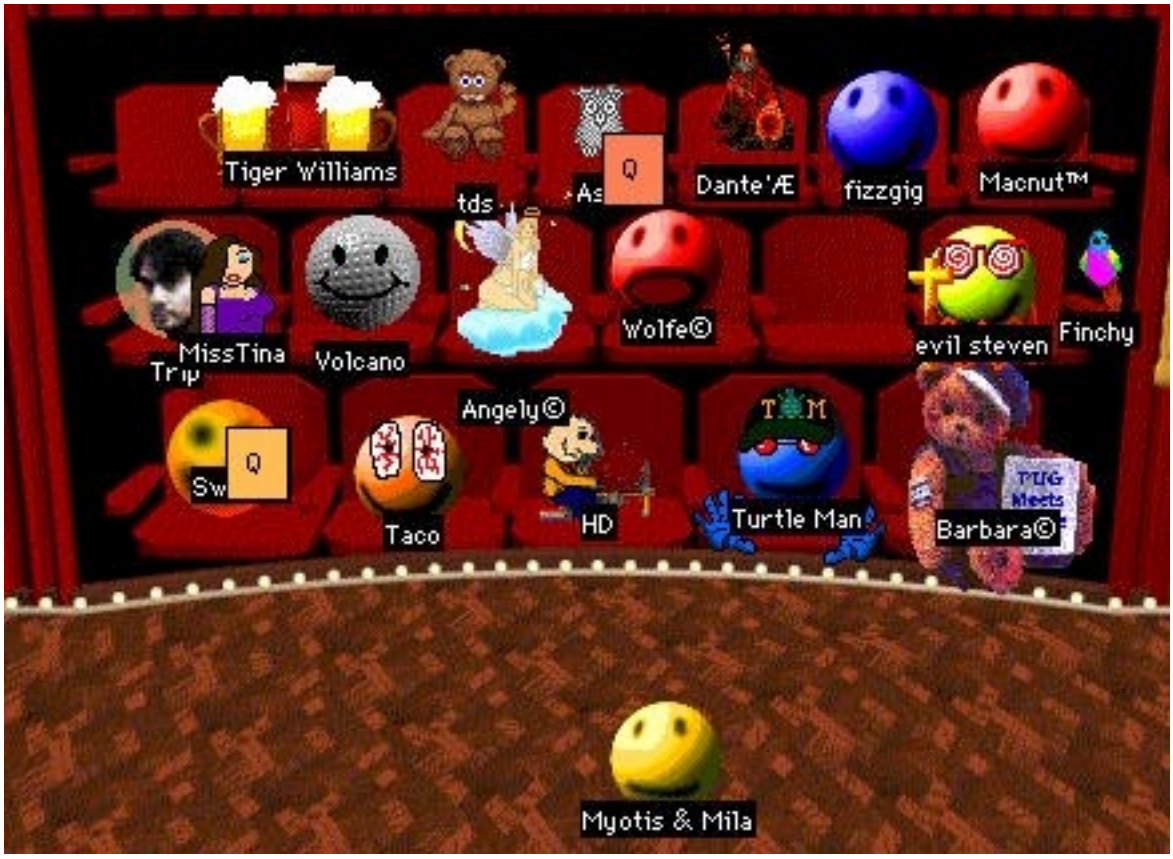
There are a wide variety of other ways that people intuitively respond to the spatial qualities of the rooms, as if they were „real" spaces. People like to

„walk“ the path from the Bar to the upstairs hallway – rather than using the „goto“ command to pop right into their destination – because it feels like a real-world, architectural corridor. At the Spa, members actually bath in the pool, adding reflections of their avatars into the water to make the scene more realistic (perhaps, according to Rorschach inkblot research, a sign of an introspective personality). Some people frequently place their avatar at the same specific spot in a room – a favorite chair, or perch, or perhaps the corner of the screen – almost as if that spot is their „territory“. There seems to be an implicit norm that the carpet in Harry's Bar is for old-timers who want to be physically close as a group, while others gather at the periphery of the room to converse in pairs or occasionally chime in with the conversation on the carpet. Even the patterns of where people place their avatars follow familiar principles in group dynamics theory. Dyads, triads, isolates, alliances, leadership patterns, and fluctuations in group cohesion are clearly visible. At meetings of the Palace User Group, the visual format of the room – an auditorium with a stage and neatly aligned rows of seats – helps create order and structure for the group's behavior.

Figs. 25/26: Meetings of the Palace User Group

Some members experience meetings of the Palace User Group (PUG) as rather chaotic. To me, they don't seem any more so than many a meeting I have attended in the real world. The visual structure of the room – a stage with neatly aligned rows of seats – helps provide structure and order to the meeting itself. In the picture above, people were encouraged to wear smileys in order to avoid large props that would cause crowding. I think everyone wearing the same prop also encouraged a feeling that status was being „equalized“ and that „we are all the same here... we are all Palace Users“. It probably encouraged group motivation, identification, and cooperation, rather strictly self-centered motivation. The picture below illustrates the use of a simple but effective visual tool for helping the

meeting run smoothly – the use of the „Q“ sign to indicate that one is „raising one’s hand“ and has a question or comment.



Palace users are not limited to the standard background graphics. The creators of Palace intentionally designed it as a virtual world where users could express themselves by shaping the environment. At the Member’s Only Palace site, people could create their own room using any background image of their choice. Cooperative „set-dressing“ in these rooms developed into a complex art form. These custom rooms became the focal points of friendship subgrouping and cliques. If you are ambitious, you can create your own Palace site on your own server, which gives you total control over the look of all the rooms. Each new space -whether it is a single customized room or a whole new site – will reflect the personality of its creator and will draw people of similar temperament. In order to attract people to a site, attempts are made to make the new environments as psychologically appealing to as many users as possible. Finchy, an old-timer at the Palace, describes her site, the „Nest“:

> „In creating the Nest, we thought about the fact that people love a spatial relationship they can „fit“ into. The rooms are designed with that thought in mind. Our goal was to create a space where people felt „at home“. The Goddess Theater is considered exceptional by many, as the perspective is highly unusual. But it works perfectly for groups of participants. Jbum said ‚The Finch Nest gets the award for the Palace that is most habitable, yet Finch-like.‘“

From a social psychological perspective, this flexibility in creating new graphical spaces is resulting in the formation of separate communities and subgroups within the Palace „universe“. Issues of immigration, territory, recruitment, intergroup cooperation and competition, loyalty and betrayal are all beginning to surface in this universe.

Let’s Get Physical

The visual and spatial qualities of Palace lead to something that is not found in text-only environments on the internet – something that has a subtle, yet profound impact on socializing. Human interaction feels *physical*. Users have at their disposal not only words to communicate, but also non-verbal behavior that can create almost tangible sensations. So far in this paper, there have been numerous examples of this „physicality“. Blocking or crowding someone’s avatar feels like a palpable invasion. Maneuvering one’s av back and forth in synchrony with another creates the intimate sensation of „dancing“. When someone is excited or agitated, their av may fidget and bounce around the room. Someone who parades back and forth while displaying fancy props looks and feels like a strutting peacock. Animated avatars can mimic all sorts of real and surrealistic movements. While users in IRC may imitate such non-verbal behaviors with action command descriptions („Sally gives Bob a push“), the effect is not the same. Visually *seeing* the behavior has a much greater psychological impact.

A key component of this physical awareness involves the dynamics of personal space, not unlike face-to-face relationships. Users instinctively feel that the area on and immediately around their avatar is *their* personal zone. Step on it without invitation, and they quickly ask, then demand you to get off. Persist, and some people will holler for a wizard to discipline you. If members don’t interpret your behavior as an invasion, they will experience it as an intimate advance. Simply to move towards and stand next to someone is seen as an act of friendship, or more. Snuggling and climbing onto someone’s icon („piggybacking“) may convey warm, sexual, or romantic feelings. They can very subtlety create emotional bonds. If someone’s snuggling goes on for too long, or is not what you want at all, you may feel restricted, suffocated, and hesitant to move away for fear of hurting feelings. Right or wrong, other people may think that you two are an „item“. The emotional depth of these non-verbal behaviors can be quite amazing. As in face-to-face interactions, they may provide glimpses into underlying feelings and attitudes that are not being expressed verbally.

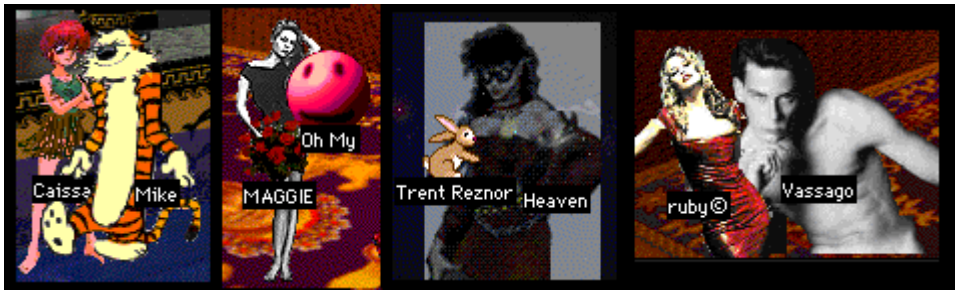


Fig. 27: Some Examples of Avatar Snuggling
Snuggling and climbing onto someone's icon may convey warm, sexual, or romantic feelings. They very subtlety create emotional bonds. If someone's snuggling goes on for too long, or is not what you want at all, you may feel restricted, suffocated, and hesitant to move away for fear of hurting feelings. Right or wrong, other people may think that you two are an „item". In some cases snuggling or piggybacking may simply be playful fun – a kind of „playing to the room" or „public theater", as one member described it.

After one member read this article, she told me about one of her incidents with snuggling which she did not experience as indicating any intimate relationship between her and the other person. Instead, it simply felt like playful fun – a kind of „playing to the room" or „public theater". She did add, though, that snuggling probably won't occur unless there is some measure of friendship between the participants. It's also interesting that she clearly remembered this particular incident – which suggests that it did have an impact on her. Being able to get close visually („physically") in cyberspace does indeed have a significant psychological effect on people.

Some avatars are designed specifically to snuggle, piggyback, or somehow interact with other avatars. One member, for example, has a pair of upside legs that he inserts down the cleavages of unsuspecting women, giving the illusion of the rest of his body being inside their dresses. This typically is a harmless prank played only on people he knows will enjoy the joke. The correct response, one female member informed me, is „oooh, that tickles!!"

Evidence of the physicality of the Palace can be very subtle. Once in a while you will enter a room where two other users are sitting, motionless. Perhaps their avatars are next to each other, perhaps not. You speak, they give a minimal reply, or don't reply at all. It's very hard to shake the feeling that these people are telepathically linked to each other, especially if they are sitting side by side. They may indeed be using the private messaging feature called „whispering". It's very hard to shake the funny feeling that they are somehow *physically* connected as a pair, as if they are sitting together on a couch – and that you are *not* part of that dyad. Two is company, three's a crowd. Confronted with this uncomfortable dilemma, most people leave the room very quickly.

Even the simple act of giving someone a prop can be very meaningful devel-

opment in a relationship. On a symbolic level, it is a sign of generosity and friendship (unless you don't want it, which makes the gift feel like an intrusion or a manipulation). On a more basic kinesthetic level, the act of „giving" someone a prop physically joins you to that person. It feels important because it feels like a tactile connection. Props as objects also allow you to physically *do* something with someone. HoBob and Amber, for example, joined together in creating a garden out of flower icons . If you get tired of playing with props, you can always go for a walk together through the Mansion – what some members call „cruising the Palace". These kinds of non-verbal, collaborative activities can solidify a relationship, much like „doing something" with friends in the real world. It's not just talk, it's a shared „physical" experience.

Fig. 28: An Example of Collaborative Activity in Using Props
Members may arrange props to create „art". Collaborative, non-verbal activities like this can be an important component of building an attachment to a fellow user.

Inside Your Av, or Out

Some multimedia worlds are 3D. Usually the view also is first person, so you live „inside" your avatar, looking out into the world much as you do in real life, without seeing your own avatar (body). You have to move through the graphical space in order to see other avatars and objects that may be hidden from view. 3D advocates like the feeling of „immersion" that such worlds create. You feel like you are really there, in the environment. Some advocates claim that this 3D living creates heightened emotional reactions because it mimics the sensory experience of the real world. Things come to-

wards you, or withdraw. You don't know what's around the next corner. There is an element not only of realism, but even suspense.

The problem with a 3D graphical experience is that it requires a lot of computing power and speed that cannot (yet) be handled too well by internet band width. The result may be a slow, jerky experience that feels disjointed, unreal, and that jars the brain. Even under ideal conditions, some people don't feel comfortable with the „head in a box" or „tunnel vision" view of 3D, first-person worlds. Lacking peripheral vision, some people feel closed in, claustrophobic.

The Palace is a 2D, third person experience. You look down onto the scene that includes your avatar and everyone else's avatar. Some people like this transcendent and somewhat paradoxical experience of being above but also in the scene. You get to see yourself, the way other people do. You move yourself about in the environment and then sit back to see what happens. Your perspective of the scene and what people are saying may seem more „objective". You may feel more free. There may even be a magical, mystical sensation to witnessing oneself within the world. Many mystical traditions emphasize the transcendent awareness that is the „observing self". The 2D worlds may address an archetypic need for such transcendence. This observing awareness is paradoxical. It simultaneously exists within the world and transcends it – a paradox that is manifested in the 2D virtual setting. Some Palace members take delight in the objective/subjective fluidity of being in the scene and above it, at the same time. The avatar appears as an independent entity that actually is a manifestation of your personality and will. Separate but connected. It can be like an artistic creation, a self portrait. It's an „out there" expression of what's inside. „It's me, it's not me.... it's both."

It's possible that when first person, 3D worlds becomes more sophisticated with the advance of technology, people will prefer them. On the other hand, some people may always favor third person, 2D environments. These differences in preference may reflect differences in cognitive and personality style.

What Lies Ahead

The wonderful, and sometimes frustrating, thing about computer technology is that it never stands still. Where are multimedia environments like the Palace headed? What advances in the world of avatar-populated environments wait for us around the bend? 3D, morphing, audio/video/tactile/olfactory-enhanced avatars? Are contemporary multimedia worlds the earliest forerunners of the Star Trek holodecks?

Gimmicks and flashy features may add some novelty to the experience. But

the most successful advances will stick to basic rules that has made Palace unique and popular. Give users the opportunity to express themselves as they wish – to explore and experiment with their interpersonal identity. Give them the ability to participate in the creation of their environment. Offer a world that can stimulate sensations of space, action, and physicality. It doesn't have to be a world that exactly imitates the „real" world. In fact, it probably would be better if it didn't. Offer a world that is an experientially robust alternative. Fantasy can be more entertaining, educational, and, paradoxically, more „true" or „real" than the real world.